

Alexey Titarenko. The City of Moist Silver

The most important thing about photographer Aleksey Titarenko is, probably, that, in his work, he has attained and explored the “third” dimension. In the literal sense, this third dimension is the dimension of airiness, of the depth of image, of damp and tangibility, of “density” of the atmosphere imprinted in the silver layer of his works. Figuratively, Titarenko’s third dimension is the dimension of history relayed through connotations of the 19th-century photography.

The heartbreaking associations of faithful reproductions of reality with the ephemeral nature of the time past provoke in the viewer the inimitable sense of absorption that would seem rather more fitting for the reader engrossed in a volume by Proust.

Yet, the visual and cultural experience of the photo artist from St. Petersburg enables him to produce the illusion of immersion in the realm of time on a par with the power of a literary illusion.

The artist’s visual experience has been built by the incessant observation of elements of the decaying classical architecture, dilapidated Baroque facades, simply-attired pedestrians who seem to step on today’s pavements from the gate-ways behind which both the 19th century and the mid-20th century are still alive. This fusion of times blurs the moving figures on a negative produced by a large old camera.

The photographer’s cultural experience taps the museum space which is saturated with the images of the transparent Venetian landscapes and Rembrandt’s chiaroscuro. St. Petersburg, like no other city in the world, emanates the misty spirit of the past that fills the St. Petersburg canals and Neva embankments. As an artifact, it has outstripped Las Vegas in the most daring postmodernist architectural fantasies by two centuries, boasting the complete precision in simulating the European look. Moreover, in contrast to the playfulness of today’s games with art, St. Petersburg has never lost the sobriety of a museum copy. People find it hard to live in it, they appear to inhabit a city of cards, and not the one distorted by Murnau’s will, where the people are the most harmonious entities in the fragmented world, but, rather, the one where the inhabitants of an immense, harmoniously built theatre are dwarfed by the stage set.

Titarenko’s photos appear to visualize the literary experience of some preliminary knowledge about St. Petersburg that a reader of Dostoevsky possesses: “ It seemed, then, that this entire world, with all of its inhabitants, weak and strong, and all of its habitations, be it beggars’ shelters or gilded palaces, looked in the dusk like a fantastic, magic dream, a dream that would soon disappear too, going in wisps to the dark-blue sky”.

All of Titarenko’s photos are as if permeated with perspiration of the mad, phantasmagoric city, with water sprays that fuse together, turning individual movements of people and of the whole human masses into the flows of water and time and into the frozen beauty of St. Petersburg’s architecture reflected in the water. Silvery water drops in the air of his works are like dust from the curtain hanging over a theater stage. Water, finally, becomes part of his photographic process – if it were not for “wet” printing, his images wouldn’t carry the impressionist or, even, the pictorial tradition of “grey tonality”, with no black or white, with nothing but close tones of silver blue and silver yellow that resemble noble old printing.

The temporal categories in Titarenko’s photography are fluid, filling images with various allusions. The blend of the literal, visual and of the figurative embedded in the literary tradition, which inherent in his work, is a rare quality. Which seems illogical and artificial although it is a given, like the very existence of St. Petersburg itself.

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